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## Outback

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### Abstract

the trees not evergreen so much as evergrey within that ghastly blank of an empty centre and alien man moving through drifts of spinifex feeling something watching him with expectation that he would succumb to the blue of frustration and become an image in the dreamtime mirage

# Stuart Newton

## OUTBACK

the trees not evergreen so much as evergrey  
within that ghastly blank of an empty centre  
and alien man moving through drifts of spinifex  
feeling something watching him with expectation  
that he would succumb to the blue of frustration  
and become an image in the dreamtime mirage

and Charles Sturt writing in his drip-sweat journal  
so great the heat that every box-screw drawn  
the horn handles of instruments and hair-combs  
split into fine laminae and lead dropped from pencils:

our hair has ceased to grow  
our nails as brittle as glass.

and Voss into night advances  
the neighing of a tethered horse,  
a distant bell, the occasional cry of night birds  
alone interrupt the silence of the camp.  
The fire smoulders slowly under the large meat-pot  
and heaven's bright constellations pass unheeded  
over the heads of dreaming wanderers

following the Barcoo northwards  
to Carpentaria Gulf  
turning westwards and losing itself  
in the central deserts  
and somewhere among the complex  
ephemeral waterholes  
he died and even now they find  
the bleached bleb bones of his entourage  
with Voss vanished into his dreams

and Burke, with camels and horses and fifteen men  
 in a race with John Stuart who gave up half-way,  
 set out from Melbourne to cross the ghastly void  
 armed with planning and well-equipped preparations:  
 splitting up to advance a party to Cooper's Creek  
 to establish a depot beside a permanent water-hole  
 then splitting again for a last fast dash north,  
 a thousand miles away. Burke and Wills,  
 King and Gray.

the plain stretched in front of them  
 – a low line of purple hills  
 – gums clumped around a water hole  
 the only goal because each was new

Three returned weakened exhausted  
 to find the depot-party had left  
 leaving a message carved on a tree  
 Returning to the Darling, signed

21 April 1861  
 that morning

William Brahe

Waiting until strength regained  
 they set off down the Cooper, but

it does not matter which channel you follow;  
 always you end up among sandhills and waterless plains  
 of sharp red rocks and occasional light thorny bushes.  
 Not sinister country – it is too bright and open for that,  
 but the space is vast and the sun pitiless:  
 time becomes an endless continuum and hours pass in torpor.  
 Torpor, inertia, that is what overcomes the traveller.

Unable to reach Mount Hopeless  
 they turned back to Cooper's Creek  
 kept just-alive by Aboriginal gifts  
 of fish and nardoo seed and water-sips

Wills died first, then Burke  
 and only King survived, demented  
 by starvation and loneliness

1&3 July

found October

Next year Stuart with ten men  
and seventy horses tried again

it came down close all around them  
dark and stern, along the ranges  
lighter hued toward the valley  
where a dried out creek crossed the land  
the sun set behind the ranges  
and for a moment the blue sky  
became gold then passed to purple  
the oppressive day giving way  
to space and freedom and stars

and returned a crippled man, half-blind,  
dying in Pommey poverty, leaving behind  
a haunting mournful sound:

like pipes of pan at Hanging Rock